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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine how parents perceive their involvement in planning the transition from school to work for their children with disabilities. A random sample of 240 parents in 9 school districts in Texas identified as having exemplary disabilities programs were contacted with a mailed survey, and 17 parents volunteered as a result of advertising in parent newsletters. Of the 240 surveys mailed, 50 were returned (20 percent); 9 of the 17 volunteers responded to the survey. Most of the parents who responded had children aged 16-18; 32 were White, 7 Black, 7 Hispanic, and 4 Asian. The study found that 46 percent of the parents had never been contacted by the school about their child's transition; most who had been contacted were contacted only once or twice; and only 13 parents reported some type of involvement. The study concluded that although the response rate was too low to draw any firm conclusions, it appears that many parents are ill-informed regarding transition and transition planning for their children with disabilities. It is possible that the low response rate is indicative of the status of parental involvement: parents may not have understood enough about transition planning to complete the survey instrument. Further research, to include telephone interviews and case studies, is planned. (13 references) (KC)

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Parents' Perceptions of their Involvement in Planning the Transition from School to Work for their Children with Disabilities

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Parents' Perceptions of their Involvement in Planning the
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INTRODUCTION

A major emphasis in working with students with disabilities is in the transition from school to work. As students with disabilities leave the public school system, plans should be made and services provided to ease their movement into the community and the world of work.

The Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1983 (PL 98-199) addressed the need for transitional services for secondary students with disabilities. Madeline Will, former assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, developed a policy paper (1984) which defined transition and called for improved transition efforts.

In Texas, Senate Bill 417 has mandated that school districts develop individual transition plans (ITPs) for each student who is at least 16 years old and who is enrolled in a special education program by September 1, 1990. In developing these transition plans, parents and students must be invited to participate (Texas Council for Exceptional Children, 1989).

Although the emphasis on transition has existed for about five or six years, planning has typically been done primarily by school personnel and adult service agencies. In a review of research on transition, McDonnell and Hardman (1985) found that despite their critical role in transition planning, little effort had been made to involve parents. According to Shevin (1983), much of parental involvement in special education has focused on "how to get the appropriate signature on the appropriate line of the appropriate form by the appropriate date" (p. 17). Senate Bill 417 adds the important element of parental involvement to the current emphasis on transition.

Transition planning is a "process that allows parents and service providers to develop the network of activities and services that will ensure a high quality of life in the community for the student following high school" and "requires parents and program planners to continually refine goals as students approach graduation" (McDonnell & Hardman, 1985, p. 276). Parental support is necessary in carrying out transition plans while the students are in high school. In addition, after students leave high school, it is up to the parents to ensure that they obtain needed services, so parental involvement in transition planning is essential.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Current legislation and research have addressed the importance of transition planning for persons with disabilities. A critical aspect of ensuring a successful transition is involving parents in making decisions regarding these issues.

The purpose of this research is to determine how parents perceive their involvement in planning the transition from school to work for their children with disabilities and what these perceptions imply for transition planning. Parents were surveyed to determine the nature of their involvement in such planning and how they perceived they could be further involved. Demographic characteristics such as SES, ethnicity, and age were also examined to determine if perceptions differed among them.

POPULATION

The population of the study consisted of parents of children, ages 16 to 22, who are receiving special education services in secondary public schools in Texas. Parents whose daughters were only being served due to pregnancy, that is when pregnancy was listed as the primary disability, were excluded from the study. Because services for pregnant students are only temporary, transition plans would not be developed for them. The population being surveyed was parents who should have been involved in transition planning for their children with disabilities.

SELECTION OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The study began with the identification of Texas school districts with exemplary transition programs. The Chair of the State Committee on Transition from School to Work at the Texas Education Agency was contacted and asked to list districts with exemplary transition programs. The list he provided was then presented to two other persons knowledgeable about transition programs at the Texas Education Agency to verify that these districts had exemplary transition programs and/or to nominate other districts. Transition specialists at six regional Education Service Centers were also contacted to identify districts. This process resulted in twelve school districts being identified as having exemplary transition programs, the criteria being that at least two people contacted identified a program as being exemplary.

The superintendents of the twelve identified districts were then sent a letter stating that their districts had been identified as having model transition programs and asking them to participate in the study. This letter was accompanied by a letter from the Chair of the State Committee on Transition from School to Work at the Texas Education Agency stating that he felt this was an important study. Nine districts agreed to participate in the study. One district declined, stating that its transition program was just beginning to involve parents and that surveying parents would not provide an accurate picture of their transition program. Two other districts declined because they felt that it would be violating the confidentiality of their information. Of the nine that agreed to participate, one district made copies of the survey and administered it to a group of eight parents they felt they had been working with the most. This made a random sample impossible, and thus this district became ineligible for the study. Eight districts were ultimately included in the study.

These districts provided lists of names and addresses of students and/or parents of students ages 16 to 22 who were receiving special education services in their districts.

INSTRUMENTATION

Based on a review of the literature, survey domains and items within domains were developed. In addition, demographic information and open-ended questions regarding transition planning were included in the survey. Design considerations included limiting the survey to one sheet of paper, front and back, and printing the survey on colored paper. The initial survey was then reviewed by the graduate advisory committee and pilot tested.

To obtain a sample for the pilot test, an advertisement was placed in five statewide parent newsletters. Additionally, a sign-up sheet asking for volunteers was placed on the registration desk at the P.A.T.H. conference in February 1990. As a result, 17 parents volunteered to respond to the survey. Nine surveys were returned, and the instrument was refined based on comments from respondents.

SAMPLE

From each district list of students, a systematic random sample of thirty names was chosen. Prior to the selection, students whose primary disability was listed as pregnance were deleted from the list. Since this is a temporary condition, and as of the 1991-92 school year pregnant students will no longer qualify for special education services, these students were eliminated from the list. Transition plans would not have been made for these students.

The process for selecting the sample involved counting the total number of names on the list and dividing that number by 30 to obtain the dividend n. Then, every nth number was systematically chosen for the sample. A random numbers table was used to determine at what name to start counting. For example, one district had 419 names on its list of students. When 419 was divided by 30, the dividend was 13.9, rounded to 14. The number 5 was obtained from the random numbers table, so the fifth name became number one of the sample. Thereafter, every fourteenth name was chosen, resulting in a systematic random sample of 30.

PROCEDURES

Parents selected for the sample were sent a preletter describing the study and advising them that they would receive a survey in approximately two weeks. Two weeks later, the survey, a cover letter , and a stamped self-addressed return envelope were mailed. With this second mailing, a three by five index card was enclosed asking them to write their name, address, and telephone number on it and return it if they would be willing to provide further information in a personal

interview. Those who did not return the survey within two weeks were then sent a post card reminder asking them to return the survey.

RESULTS

To date, of the 240 surveys mailed, 50 have been returned. This is a 20% return rate, making generalizations about transition programs in general impossible. Response rates for individual districts ranged from 7 to 33%; because these numbers were small, data has been analyzed as one sample and not divided into districts. This is a limitation of the research, as it is assumed that different districts have different programs. Results are presented below according to sections of the survey.

General Information

The age of the students whose parents were surveyed ranged from 15 to 21, with 80% of the students being ages 16 to 18. Most of the students were in 11th grade (46%), with three students being considered post-high school. In terms of ethnicity, of the fifty respondents, 32 were white, 7 were black, 7 were Hispanic, and 4 were Asian. Parents reported the following disabilities for their children: learning disability (18), mental retardation (13), physical (3), emotional (6), speech (1), two or more disabilities (8), and slow learner (1). The types of special education programs in which students participated included the following: resource room (18), self-contained classroom (14), supported employment (2), speech therapy (3), adaptive behavior (1), mainstreamed (2), full-time employment (1), and other (3); six respondents did not indicate educational program. Thirty of the students were male and 20 were female. When asked if their child had a transition plan, 12 respondents said yes, 14 said no, 19 did not know, and 5 did not respond. Eleven of the students were employed. Wages ranged from $3.25 to $5.00; two students were working for no wages at training sites. Students jobs had been found by the students themselves (4), the school (3), an agency (2), and by two or more people (1).

Parents' occupations and education levels were used to calculate a socioeconomic status (SES) figure. Occupations listed on the surveys were placed into six occupational levels: Professional and Managerial I, Professional and Managerial II, Semi-Professional and Small Business, Skilled, Semi-Skilled, and Unskilled (Roe, 1956). Education level consisted of highest grade completed, with 13 to 16 being years of college and 17 being any graduate college. The formula for calculating the SES level was (7 X occupational level) + (4 X education level) (O'Reilly, 1973). Three surveys did not have enough information to calculate SES levels. The levels of the remaining 47 surveys ranged from 13 to 65; the mean SES level was 44.32 with a standard deviation of 12.54.

Respondents to the survey included parents (25 mothers, 8 fathers, 11 non-specified), guardians (3), and other relatives (3). Four of the fifty respondents belonged to one or more advocacy groups. The following table presents their answers to the survey items in terms of number responding to the item (N), the frequency of responses by number chosen on the scale, and the mean of the responses.

Perceptions about Involvement in Transition Planning

		STRONGLY AGREE				STRONGLY DISAGREE	
	N	1	2	3	4	5	X
School Contact							
The school has contacted me to begin transition planning for my child.	46	11	10	4	7	14	3.07
I am contacted regularly during the year regarding my child's transition.	46	7	8	6	5	20	3.52
I feel comfortable contacting the school to discuss my child's transition.	46	19	7	8	5	7	2.43
I am satisfied with the way the school keeps in touch with me.	47	12	6	9	8	12	3.04
ARD/Transition Meetings							
The school plans meetings to fit my schedule.	48	23	8	7	5	5	2.19
I go to all ARD/Transition meetings.	48	27	10	1	6	4	1.96
Test results about my child are presented clearly.	48	20	12	7	5	4	2.19
School personnel are well-prepared at the meetings.	47	21	13	5	6	2	2.04
I am asked for my opinion at meetings.	46	22	14	5	3	2	1.89
I give information about my child at the meetings.	46	27	15	1	1	2	1.61
The school appreciates and uses my information in transition planning for my child.	44	18	5	10	4	7	2.48
People from TRC and/or MHMR come to the meetings.	41	7	5	9	7	13	3.34
Everyone at the meeting helps make plans for my child.	46	19	10	8	7	2	2.20
Everyone at the meeting has an equal say in making plans for my child.	45	19	8	11	4	3	2.20
IEP/Transition Plan Development							
The IEP/Transition Plan is developed at the meeting.	41	9	13	11	2	6	2.59
I am asked about my child's strengths and weaknesses.	46	16	17	4	2	7	2.28
I am asked about possible jobs or work sites for my child.	44	11	7	6	5	15	3.14
Academic and vocational goals are based on my child's interests and abilities.	44	15	3	10	7	9	2.82
I know exactly what my child will do when he or she leaves high school.	41	6	3	3	11	18	3.78
People from TRC and/or MHMR help make plans for my child.	40	8	2	6	8	16	3.55

	N	STRONGLY AGREE 1	2	3	4	STRONGLY DISAGREE 5	X
IEP/Transition Plan Implementation							
The school asks me how much I wanted to work with my child at home.	46	7	8	8	6	17	3.39
I am asked what skills I can teach my child at home.	46	6	5	5	11	19	3.69
My active participation in teaching/training my child is encouraged.	44	8	7	11	10	8	3.06
School representatives are sensitive to my family's needs.	45	9	11	12	2	11	2.89
I am given lists of my child's class activities that I could reinforce at home.	43	5	5	7	9	17	3.65
Parent Education/Training							
I am told about other services my child can receive.	46	9	5	3	8	21	3.59
The school tells me about current laws, including my and my child's rights.	45	14	12	5	6	8	2.60
I am given names of parent organizations that can help me.	45	6	5	6	8	20	3.69
The school conducts training meetings for parents with students ages 16-21.	43	5	3	5	5	25	3 98
I have been introduced to people from TRC and/or MHMR.	44	6	4	5	7	22	3.79
I am told about services provided by TRC and/or MHMR.	43	8	2	5	6	22	3.74

Participant Information

The four open-ended questions on the survey are presented below with summaries of responses.

When were you first contacted by the school about planning your child's transition?

Of the 50 respondents, 9 did not answer the question and 4 were unsure. Three stated they had been contacted from the beginning; the researcher assumes this is the beginning of high school. Three were contacted at the end of the 1989-90 school year and 8 at the beginning of the 1990-91 school year. Twenty-three (46%) had never been contacted regarding transition.

How many times a year does the school contact you to discuss your child's transition?

Thirteen respondents did not answer this question. Six respondents stated that the school contacted them twice a year, 11 that the school contacted them once a year. Four stated the only contact they had was the A. R. D. meeting, and 16 stated that they were never contacted or had not yet been contacted.

From what the school has told you, describe transition and transition planning for your child.

Nineteen parents did not respond to this question; two responded but did not address the question. Twenty-one responses indicated that they had not heard from the school regarding transition; these included statements such as the following: none to my knowledge, they're waiting for someone to set up a program, still unknown and undecided. Three respondents had fairly good definitions of transition. Another felt that it was a plan to encourage independent living. One thought that it was to recommend classes to prepare a student for after high school. One parent stated that she was told that if her daughter did not drop out of school by 10th grade they would then develop a plan.

How are you involved in your child's transition?

Eighteen parents did not respond to the question, and five responded, but did not answer the question. Fourteen parents stated that they are not involved; thirteen described some type of involvement. One parent had contacted the school, but felt that they were not concerned; the special education department told her they did not know much about dyslexia. Another stated that he was involved at the meetings, but plans were discontinued too quickly.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the response rate is too low to make any firm conclusions, it appears that many parents are ill-informed regarding transition and transition planning for their children with disabilities. In general, some parents appear to be either very satisfied with their understanding of and their involvement in transition planning for their children or very dissatisfied. Since legislation regarding transition planning became effective on September 1, 1990, perhaps schools are just beginning to inform and involve parents.

It is possible that the low response rate is indicative of the status of parental involvement in transition planning. Parents may not have understood enough about transition to understand the survey instrument. Further attempts to contact nonrespondents need to be conducted before firm conclusions can be made.

FUTURE PLANS

Due to the low return rate, additional measures are planned to attempt to raise the number of survey responses. Telephone numbers will be obtained for respondents and they will be telephoned and asked if they received the survey and if they are willing to respond. If they agree to respond, they will be given the option of responding over the telephone or being sent an additional interview. Persons who do not have a telephone will be mailed another copy of the survey with a cover letter and another stamped self-addressed envelope.

Following the completion of the survey research, three to five case studies will be conducted to provide descriptive data to enhance survey findings. This will be combined with descriptions of transition programs provided by the eight school districts. The combination of the survey research and the case studies should provide a rich description of the best transition practices in Texas and implications for further refinement of transition programs.

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